

Designing Materials: for Teacher Autonomy

By Ingrid Wisniewska

Teacher autonomy is a precondition for learner autonomy (Little 1995). Learner autonomy can be described as the ability to take control of one's own learning in order to maximize its full potential. Methodology workshops for teachers which incorporate elements of autonomy in their process design can encourage teachers to become more self-directed in their professional lives and enable them to realise the benefits of gradually introducing more learner autonomy into their classrooms.

Background

"What do you expect to gain from this course?" This is the question I ask primary and secondary school teachers of English who attend inservice methodology workshops at the Pedagogical Centre in Prague. Their answer? "New ideas" and "new materials."

Teachers who are relatively inexperienced often believe that a handful of exciting new games is what they really need to liven up their lessons. Even teachers who have been teaching other subjects for many years, such as Russian, come to methodology workshops expecting to receive new ideas and new materials from the mass of ELT literature published in the West. Given these expectations it may seem entirely appropriate for the teacher trainer to present methodology workshops based around practical, ready-to-use ideas for the classroom. But how effective are they?

In the short term, the benefits of presenting ready-to-use teaching techniques and materials seem to be very high. They are motivating, they meet teachers' perceived needs, and they are exciting to try out with a group of teachers. At the end of the session, the teachers walk happily away with a collection of new activities, and the trainer feels the satisfaction of having "given" them what they wanted.

In practice, how many of those teachers will remember the activities well enough to feel confident in using them with their students? How many will say, "Well, that worked in a group of teachers, but what about my 10- year-olds?" Maybe some of the teachers will try them out in their class once, using the material just as it had been given to them. Many teachers may just put them away in a neat file marked "New Materials."

Introducing teachers to one or two new communicative activities will probably not have a significant impact on their teaching. More important, reinforcing teachers' expectations that their professional development depends on receiving new ideas and materials from outside sources does not encourage teachers to feel in control of their own professional development.

Designing Materials

In response to these problems, I decided to refocus the aim of my training sessions to encourage more teacher autonomy and therefore more long-term benefits, while still satisfying the thirst for "new ideas." I selected only those activities which could be used many times over if they were adapted by teachers to suit their own teaching contexts. I adapted the activity using topics appropriate for teachers. Then I asked the teachers to adapt the material for their students and share the results of their work together in the session.

Here is the basic framework for the workshop:

1. Teachers try out the language activity. They comment on its advantages and the potential problems of using it with students.
2. Teachers brainstorm possible themes or grammar/vocabulary areas for which the activity could be used with students. These are written on the board.
3. Each pair or group of teachers selects one theme or area to work with, and they adapt the activity for use with their students.
4. The completed work is passed around to other groups for comments, corrections, improvements, and praise.
5. The variations of the activity are displayed on the wall and/or copied for all participants.
6. Teachers reflect on aspects of learner autonomy experienced in the session and how they could introduce more learner autonomy into their English lessons.

Here is an example of an activity which illustrates this procedure (the numbers below correspond to those above):

1. Each teacher receives a tasksheet such as the one below. Their task is to walk around the class and ask questions to fill in the blanks with the names of other people in the group:
2. After completing the activity and commenting on its advantages and disadvantages, teachers brainstorm different topics which could be used for practise. They came up with the following ideas: *grammar* -past tense, future tense, present perfect, prepositions; *themes* -hobbies, animals/pets, food, summer holidays, Christmas/New Year, language learning habits.
3. Here is an example of a tasksheet prepared by teachers on the topic of Christmas: For this activity, each group or pair had to produce 10 to 15 sentences or sufficient for the number of students in their class. Producing the worksheet together is much more interesting than sitting alone at your desk and trying to come up with 15 different ideas! And many of the ideas are specific to the local cultural context, which makes them more relevant and more interesting than those found in foreign textbooks.
4. Commenting on each others' work enables teachers to draw on the pool of experience in the group. Practical queries can come up and be discussed without the trainer having to step in. Many further suggestions and additions can also result from this.
5. Teachers can make a neat copy of their work (adding pictures if they can) and these may be displayed for other teachers to copy or, if facilities are available, they can be

photocopied for everyone. This is an important stage of the session as it validates the results of the teachers' work.

6. At this final stage, teachers reflect on the elements of learner autonomy they have experienced in the workshop: students (in this case, teachers) initiate and choose the topics they want to work on; students produce materials which help them in their further learning; peer and self-evaluation of student-produced work is encouraged; the activity develops skills which are transferable without the aid of a teacher. If this has been a positive experience for them, why not for their students also? How can students be more actively involved in designing materials for use in their English lessons?

Advantages and Disadvantages of Teacher-produced Materials

The advantages of this approach for teachers are:

- It is empowering. Many teachers lack confidence in using their own ideas.
- It is memorable. Teachers have made a personal investment of time and energy.
- It is creative. Teachers working together can come up with many more ideas than any single trainer or textbook author and the ideas are more relevant to the teachers' own context.
- It encourages critical evaluation of teaching materials.
- The experience is transferable. If this activity can be adapted so easily, what about other activities? It is the start of an ongoing process which gives teachers control over their materials. Some of the disadvantages for teachers are:
- It takes up more session time, which means a reduction in the number of "new" ideas presented.
- As with any type of group work, it is not always possible to ensure that everyone is involved. Teachers, like students, can exercise their right to withdraw from group activities if they feel it is a waste of time.

The advantages for the trainer are:

- You can see how well the teachers have grasped the communicative principles behind the activity as well as its mechanics.
- You can see concrete and visible results of teachers' applying a new idea to their own context.
- The sessions are more creative (and therefore more unpredictable!). The disadvantages for the trainer are:
- You may feel that you are not fulfilling the expected role of "giver." Especially on short, intensive courses, it may seem that you are "wasting time."
- Devolving power can create learning opportunities, but this does not always mean that they are used wisely!

For these reasons, it is probably a good idea to explain the principles behind your choice of this process approach and what you hope to achieve by it.

Conclusion

For many teachers, the idea of designing their own materials seems impractical-it takes too much time! Adapting materials in the training session can show that it needn't take a lot of time. The teachers I have worked with have certainly seemed surprised and pleased at the wealth of ideas that were produced in their groups. This approach can give teachers a much-needed boost to their confidence as well as being a positive and empowering experience of teacher autonomy. Let's hope it will also lead to more learner autonomy in the classroom.

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References

- Little, D. 1995. Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues, and problems. Dublin, Ireland: Authentik.